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Michael Flecky, S.J.

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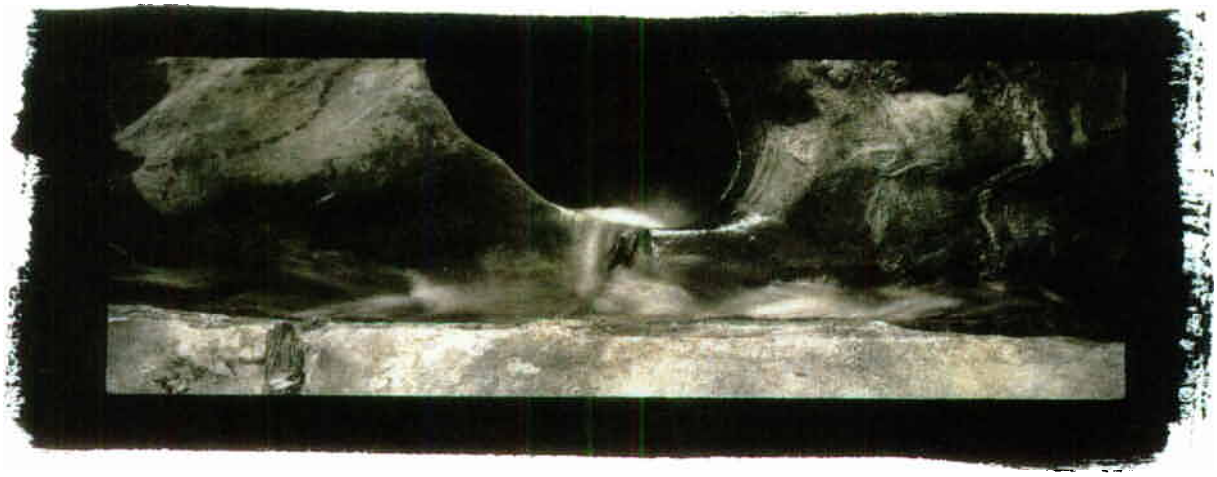

Michael Flecky, "Tuckasegee Gorge," Platinum, 4 x 9"

Our Spirits in Matter: Making Photographs as Jesuit Education

MICHAEL FLECKY, S.J.

A little more than two months ago, our art community at Creighton University was faced with the death of a former student who was much admired for her gracious and generous spirit, artistic energy, and appreciation of life. She was a student who had come to the art department after raising three children and after a career as a nurse. Her first photography class was a very rich experience and the beginning of ten years of part-time study leading eventually to her degree as an art major with honors. From the time of her first class, which as it turned out coincided with the beginning of her battle with breast cancer, she went from tentative exploration in her image-making to becoming a clearly accomplished artist.

At the time of her funeral, I recalled having lunch with Ulla after a particularly difficult period of treatment. She spoke cheerfully about the prospect of six additional months of life to do her work and then told me that her art work gave her a reason to live. I was initially surprised and I reminded her of her loving husband, wonderful and talented children, and many devoted friends. It seemed a startling thing to say for one who seemed to have so much to live for. She explained that what she discovered in her art was very different, something uniquely her own and personally challenging, life-giving in a very different way than as a wife and mother. She spoke of how treasured and purposeful had become her life as an artist. I thought about that soberly many times as her sickness became more relentless and she continued to live to do her art. I spoke about this with her husband and children at her funeral, and to their credit, they seemed to understand better than I could the importance of art in Ulla's life. More than once they referred to her student career at Creighton and her notable artistic accomplishment as her "defining moment" and the fulfillment of her life's energy and spirit.

In my eighteen years as a teacher and artist at Creighton University I have witnessed many other, though less dramatic, experiences of awakening, conversion,

Michael Flecky, S.J., is associate professor of fine arts and associate chair of fine and performing arts at Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska.

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and fulfillment in the lives of students who have learned to see and appreciate life through their work as artists. Their lives have been turned around; they have found a mission and vocation for which they cannot be anything but passionate. To an innocent question, "Where do you plan to go with your work?" a student answered with unexpected emotion, "I have never thought of work as my own!" Two other students who had always been considered disabled learners discovered in their art something that they could do very well. For perhaps the first time in their lives, they thought of their talents as valuable. These rich experiences bring me back to teaching each semester and cause me to wonder at the miracles that art produces on our campus. Moments such as these in the lives of my students and colleagues at Creighton prompt me to pose larger questions about art, its place in Jesuit education, the role of the artist in our culture and world, and the nature of art as a spiritual activity among the people of God.

What is the use of art? What kind of learning does it accomplish? Why art in a college curriculum? How does art enhance the vocations of our students, graduates, faculties? What does art have to do with the mission of Jesuit education? Why do we need artists in our society and culture, in our churches? How do we encounter the spirit of God in a work of art? What is sacred in the vocation of the artist? These questions are obviously interrelated and rub off on one another. And when I speak about art, though I am thinking primarily about photography and visual art, with which I am most familiar, I suspect what I say can also apply to forms such as music, literature, theater, and dance.

1. Art is Language

Each semester that I teach beginning photography, I try to emphasize that visual art is a language, one that is extremely pervasive in our lives. Although a visual language with its own syntax of light, color, shadow, line, shape, scale, positive and negative space, proportion, and the limits of a framework, art is a type of language nonetheless. As with spoken or written language, the history, theory, and syntax of art language is also a lot easier to teach than is fluency—how to value one's own observations and to express them in an original way, and how to create thereby a world of meaning. Though it is challenging to refine techniques and processes, the ultimate purpose of art is to be able to say something, to be able to express ideas, and to be aware and critical of the ideas of others. If we don't have anything to say, we shouldn't be artists. We need to live art actively and responsively, to live and grow as artists with something crucial to say and do about the world in which we live. In photography there are enough people "taking" competent pictures; what is needed, and what I attempt to do in my own work, is to "make" pictures that speak a fresh vision of spirit and imagination, thought and feeling. And for that we need language,

2. Art is Vision

In the first art class I also alert students that they will learn to see in an entirely new way. They will learn to see actively, as opposed to the passive looking that gets them from the parking lot to the bookstore. They will learn to notice the surface and texture of a building, the direction of light reflecting from human hair, the relationship of objects that appear in the background and foreground of a scene, how trees can be shapes as well as structures, transparent as well as opaque. This is one of the outcomes that students most commonly observe at the end of their first class. Whether or not they ever make another photograph or drawing, like the man in the gospels cured of his blindness, they will never see the same way again. In this context, I am reminded of the observation that Annie Dillard makes in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* about some people who were cured of cataracts with new surgical techniques in the nineteenth century but preferred blindness to the challenge of seeing. Acute vision is not an unmixed blessing, as any committed artist can tell you. But then neither is education.

3. Art is Response

One of the things that characterizes the artist is a need to respond to what one sees. In addition to perceptive vision, the work of the artist is to fashion a response. Students learn not only to take notice but to craft a personal answer, to make a return. When they become artists they are compelled not only to see and feel their world, but to do something about it in a conscious way, whether in dance, music, poetry, sculpture, theater, or visual images. From the awareness of seeing and feeling, artists answer in imitation and antiphon. One of the marks of the art spirit is the need to make a response. It's the kind of compulsion that can force you off the road to take out a sketch pad or journal. By extension, I maintain that any conscious action such as sewing a button on a shirt, planting a garden, driving a

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car, or teaching a child to read can be creative and artful. Many students learn that art is a pattern of responsive living. And it is at this point, the connection between vision and a responsive life, that I think the bridge to Jesuit education can best be crossed.

4. Art is Spiritual Activity

I frequently encounter the question, What is the place of a secular activity like fine art among the spiritual goals of Catholic and Jesuit education? Can one who is trained as an artist expect to glimpse the face of God the Creator who is in all? The question is apparent in the bewilderment of artists around the dinner table of a friend when the conversation comes around to whether I am married and have a family, and I respond that I am a priest and live in a religious community. An artist and a priest? After an uneasy moment of silence, however, these artists are quick to admit that they are deeply aware of the spiritual dimension of their work, even if in a way that may seem a bit unconventional. They sense a connection between their work and the dynamic energy of God. They can understand that to make graven images is the privilege and domain of a personal Creator. They appreciate that the Spirit gives life; to the extent that their art breathes, cleanses, purifies, and gives birth, they know it is spirited. And they welcome the possibility that their own spiritual calling may in some small way be supported by the commitment to art of one who is an ordained minister (even a priest!) in a traditional religious community.

As a matter of fact, I think that it is sometimes easier for artists to admit the possibility of their work as spiritual than it is for so-called spiritual people to admit their work is art. Witness the awkwardness of the Catholic layman at a Jesuit university trustee's dinner when I tell him that I am a Jesuit priest and teach art in the university. The conversation moves quickly to talk about the basketball team. Face it, art scares some people. Perhaps the problem is that Jesuit educators have not appropriately recognized the activity of art in the constellation of spiritual gifts or even as essential tools for human development. We are not convinced that art feeds the soul. We are more likely to think of art as a leisure activity or something you do on vacation or for entertainment—a good hobby, like golf or coin collecting. It was the lesson I was taught by my sick student, that her new-found commitment to art could be as spiritually vital as husband and family, nursing career and friends.

5. Art is a School of Ignatian Perfection

It is a fact, regrettably, that artists are more likely to be convinced of the spirit of their materials than that "spiritual" people are aware of the material of their spirits. And yet one of the important tasks of Jesuit education is to bring the spiritual and material worlds together for the growth of the complete human person and the whole of creation.

Just to speak of "bringing" the two worlds together is to suggest a duality that denies the mystery of Christ's Incarnation, the belief that, as the Jesuit poet Hopkins expressed it, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." Perhaps it would be better to say that we seek in Jesuit education to "rehabilitate" belief in the Spirit which enlivens created matter and can be found in all things.

But back to the bridge where responsive vision leads to the place of art in Jesuit education. I think that whatever we name as "Jesuit" about the education that takes place in our schools and universities is in some way to be found in the primer for Jesuit education and ministry, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. The artist who is trained to see acutely and to make enthusiastic response might well be on the path of Ignatian perfection and the goal of the Exercises: an ability to see God in creatures and the active power of God in all things at all times. One of the pivotal graces of prayer in the Exercises is the gift of finding God in creatures, to see in creation the gifts of a loving God, and to make a choice in the manner of Jesus Christ to share that discovery. Even beginning students know the urge to share the beauty and truth of their vision. They have a need, above and beyond noticing and giving thanks, to make a response. For those artists who are aware, if only vaguely, that they are in the presence of a spiritual power when they are creatively active, it remains only to name and to know even more intimately and personally the God who touches them in the act of creation. Their "work" is both act of praise and act of love, and the connection between that response and the source of creation is the first principle and foundation of the Spiritual Exercises.

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Michael Flecky, "Clongowes Wood, Kildare," Platinum 7 x 9"

I THINK THAT IT
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IS ART.

6. Art is Prayer: Contemplation in Action

Much more could be said about the work of the artist, student or teacher, in connection with St. Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius says that a loving response to creation "ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than in words." I know any number of artists that consider their "deeds" a loving experience of prayer. I would be willing to offer my own belief that artistic image-making can be authentic prayer in the specific manner of Ignatian Contemplation. Consider how artists create images that make the world real and make themselves real. I say something by my position and role in a picture: a scene projected in a photograph from where and who I am "images" my truth. What goes on in my imagination goes on in my life. My imagination tells me and others who I am. One could say that the precise goal of contemplative prayer in the Exercises is to reconstruct personally compelling images that become real through our imagination such that we can later "remember" them and draw on them with conviction. This kind of vivid urgency, which is the goal of the artist, is exactly what St. Ignatius seeks as a prelude to conversion in the Exercises. And if the object of Ignatian contemplation is finally to know Jesus, then it is in the truth revealed by my imagination that I enter into colloquy with Him,

7. Art is Service

A final word about service, an essential of Jesuit education. We have repeatedly heard of the importance of educating women and men for others. When we consider the life of Jesus in the Exercises and in the gospels, we encounter the teaching that one cannot live well except by a life of service. So what service does art provide? What good does the artist do for the needy? To put the issue simply, art deals with limitations and gives us courage. Limitations are what art is about. The material limitations of time, space, shape, and tone are what allow for recognizable form in art and to which one must be sensitive. In a world that does not like to admit limits or acknowledge fixed and proper space, art paradoxically gives us license to celebrate limits and contrasts. In this, the truthful artist will become aware even of the limits to what is beautiful and gratifying. In a world that denies the limits of humanity, art can lend dignity even to death. Acute vision beholds sunrises, yes, but also sees darkness. As my spiritual director once put it, you can't take the "Jerusalem bypass" to the fishfry on the lakeshore. As response to the inevitable experience of failure and betrayal, art provides a way of accepting or "enclosing" the effects of negativity in a positive gesture of creation.

In the struggle to be faithful to promises and vows and visions, to be responsible for the lives and the world we have been given as a trust, to comfort and to be comforted in the pain and tragedy of our losses, to be human in the light of what is sacred, to empower the poor, art provides us with vision and strength. To the question of how art helps one live a life of faith and justice and to confront the everyday challenge, even the terror, of human living, the photographer Robert Adams has said, "[art] is designed to give us courage . . . . [I]t works to convince us of life's value; the darkness that art combats is the ultimate one, the conclusion that life is without worth and finally better off ended" (70). In his *Beauty in Photography*, he repeats the words of William Carlos Williams:

> It is difficult
> to get the news from poems
> yet men die miserably every day
> for lack
> of what is found there.
>
> ("Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,"Bk. I, ll. 317-21)

To see and appreciate creation, to engage our own truths, to find God in all things, to create loving gifts in response, to nourish the imagination: for all these, the teaching and making of art on a Jesuit university campus is a highly useful service.

And may it continue to provide a "defining moment" for what life we are given.

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